

The House of Whispers

By
WILLIAM
JOHNSTON

Illustrations by
IRWIN MYERS

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"SOMETHING WRONG HERE."

Synopsis—Circumstances having prevented Rufus Nelson, eldest son of the American forces going to France, he is in a despondent mood when he receives an invitation to dinner from his great-uncle, Rufus Gaston. On his way to the house he meets, under peculiar circumstances, a young girl, apparently in trouble, to whom he has an opportunity to be of slight service. She is the daughter of an apartment building as Rufus Gaston, and he accompanies her home.

CHAPTER I.—Continued.

Although I tried to pretend an interest in their conversation and absent myself from their questions about my family, my thoughts kept constantly recurring to the strange trouble of the girl across the hall, her plight interesting me far more than the purpose for which my great-uncle had sent for me. I had expected that he would broach the subject himself, but the coffee arrived and still the conversation had been limited to stilted family chat. As we returned to the living room, I decided to give him a lead:

"My mother wrote me—" I began.

"Oh, yes," said old Rufus, looking relieved.

"Yes, yes, of course," echoed Mrs. Gaston.

I waited for one or the other of them to proceed but for some reason they both seemed at a loss for words.

"You tell him," Rufus said, my great-uncle at last.

His tired old eyes studied my countenance carefully, searching, as if he was trying to read my soul.

"What is it?" I asked impatiently.

"It is this," said old Rufus, speaking slowly and with effort, as if he hated to disclose his intentions.

"Three days from now—that will be Sunday morning—my wife and I are going to Maine to be gone for some months. We have leased a furnished cottage there and shall take our servants and our motor with us. We do not like to leave this apartment wholly untenanted, and it occurred to Mrs. Gaston that you might occupy it in our absence."

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hearing voices—whispers, whispers, whispers! That is why we are going away. My wife thinks it is an account of my health. I don't want her to know. Please, please, Spalding, find out what it is before we return. I have no son. There is no one else but you to do it. Solve the mystery for me. Find out about the whispers. Promise me you will. Shh—not a word to her! Not a word!"

He withdrew his hand on my arm and held his finger on his lips as he heard his wife returning. With a visible effort he straightened up, and when she entered the room he apparently had entirely recovered his self-possession and was his natural self again, a dignified, world-weary old man.

"I can't find your keys, Rufus," said my great-uncle, "you had better get them yourself."

The minute he left the room she hastened to my side and she, too, began to whisper mysterious warnings, exhibiting a terror, hardly less than her aged husband's.

"This is a house of mystery," she announced. "I'm always hearing strange sounds here. He doesn't know—with a nod in the direction old Rufus had gone, and I do not want him to. That is the reason I am taking him away. Solve the mystery of it before we return. I'll pay you. I'll make it well worth your while."

Her husband's shuffling in the passage warned her of his return, and she quickly dropped my arm. As he entered she was telling me in quite normal tones to be sure to remember her to my mother the next time I wrote.

Old Rufus handed me the keys, explaining which was which.

"And remember," said my great-uncle, as he escorted me to the door, "you are not to come until Sunday morning at ten, after we have gone. And remember the combination of the safe—remember!"

The instant way in which he repeated the word conveyed to me forcefully that what he most wanted me to remember was the strange warning he had given me, and as I closed his hand in parting I tried by the firmness of my grip to let him know that I understood.

"Remember," repeated my aunt, too, as she stood there in the door a little behind him, at the same time giving me a significant look.

Yet, puzzling as had been the conduct of both of them, my memories that night were not of their warning.

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greeted me pleasantly. "Making as early call, aren't you?"

"I'm coming here to live for a while," I answered, falling into step with her.

"The Gastons are going to Maine and have asked me to occupy their apartment while they are away."

As we chatted we had entered the building, and as before I went into the elevator with her. As I left her at the door, wondering if she had had any more encounters in the park, yet hardly daring to ask, she turned to me, half apologetically, and said:

"Mr. Nelson, since you've come to live here in the house, I must be careful. We have not been introduced, and my people will think it strange if they see me speaking to you. You understand, don't you? You must not speak to me or recognize me until—"

"Until what?" I cried eagerly.

"Until we can manage to be properly introduced."

"Yet," I insisted, "you promised to let me help you."

"I have not forgotten. I'm grateful, really I am. Perhaps I may call on you some day. I may have to. If I do, I'll find some way of letting you know."

"Some secret way," I suggested, half sarcastically.

"Perhaps," she laughingly nodded as we separated.

As I took out the keys my great-uncle had given me and entered the apartment, I looked about me with a wholly new interest. That little word "mine" makes a vast difference in the way we regard things. Now that these luxurious quarters were to be my home, temporarily at least, I looked about curiously. Certainly at first glance there was nothing mysterious in the atmosphere. Setting my bag down I began an immediate inspection of the rooms.

The Gaston apartment, I discovered, occupied one whole side of the sixth floor of a twelve-story building. Around the elevator shaft that came up through the center was a small square court with four doors, two opening into the Bradford apartment opposite and two into the one I was occupying. The east apartments were known as Six A and the west as Six B. The door by which I had entered led into a lofty foyer, connecting by sliding doors with a great dining room and beyond it, in the front of the house, with a reception or living room that ran the entire width of the apartment. Back of the elevator, with a separate door for the servants' use, were the kitchen, the butler's pantry, a servants' sitting room and two bedrooms. From the foyer a long hall ran almost the length of the building. On the servants' side it was blank as to doors, save for the passage from the pantry to the dining room, but on the other side several doors opened into spacious sitting rooms, each with its own bath. As I was wondering which of the bedrooms my great-uncle had expected me to occupy, I noticed still another door which I found led into a small bedroom on the servants' side of the house, but unconnected with the quarters. While it was less elaborately furnished than the rooms opposite, it was comfortable enough, and it had a spacious bathroom adjoining. The fact that the bed here had been left turned down was evidence enough that it was intended for my occupancy. Returning to the foyer to get my bag and unpack it, I was startled by the ringing of the front doorbell.

I sprang eagerly to answer it. It must be Miss Bradford. Probably she had reconsidered and had decided to take me into her confidence. Who else could it be? There was no one else who knew I was in the apartment. It must be Miss Bradford!

With an exclamation of welcome on my lips I flung open the door. A man stood there—an utter stranger. In my disappointment I was almost closing the door in his face, but he was so polite that I could not do so. He was a man of about thirty, with a high forehead, dark hair, and a serious expression. He was dressed in a suit and tie, and he was looking at me with a steady gaze.

"What do you want?" I asked, my voice a little sharp.

"Oh, I am, is it?" he replied, eyeing me with what seemed to me a most insolent stare.

"What do you mean?" I asked, bewildered. Certainly I never had seen this person before. He was short and stocky, with sparse nondescript hair and weak, shifty blue eyes. His face had an unhealthy pallor, as if he had lived long away from the sunlight, and was sunken in as if from undernourishment. Yet the hardness of his shoulders and his huge rough hands seemed to indicate physical strength beyond the ordinary.

"You're Mr. Spalding Nelson, aren't you?"

"That's my name," I answered shortly.

"Mr. Gaston's?" He paused, as if trying to recall the relationship.

"Mr. Gaston's great-nephew."

"I guess you are him, all right," he said, in a manner of evident relief. "I'm Mr. Wick, the superintendent of the house."

"Of course," I answered, feeling rather foolish at my own vexation.

"Mr. Gaston told me you were coming in this morning," he hastened to explain.

"He gave me a description of you," Mr. Wick went on, unperturbed, "and the boys in the hall were pretty sure it was you that came in, but—"

"But what?"

"I couldn't understand it. You didn't announce yourself. It seemed funny, your coming in with the young lady from next door."

"It just happened that way," I explained, now understanding his mystification. "I met her as I was coming in."

"Twice," he said, rather insolently. "I can't see that it is any of your business," I retorted angrily, "if it happened a dozen times."

His manner at once became apologetic, and he hastened to offer obsequious explanations.

"Mr. Gaston asked me to take particular notice. The other evening when you were coming to dinner he told me to tell the hall boys to look at you closely so that they could identify you as the right party when you came in today. That was how it happened. You see, sir, in a house of this sort we have to be careful. It doesn't do to let strangers prowling about without finding out who they are and what they are doing."

"The hero's troubles begin."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Prepared for the Worst.

Mr. Grump (calling upstairs): "What a time you are taking to get dressed for the concert! Look at me; a bit of wadding in each ear and I'm all ready."—Boston Transcript.

BRANDS AND STANDARDS TEND TO DEVELOP BETTER FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC MARKETS



Inspecting Butter Preparatory to Shipping It to a Foreign Market. Other Things Being Equal, Inspected Products Are Counted More Desirable Than Those Not Inspected.

(Prepared by the United States Department of Agriculture.)

There may be nothing in a name, but there is in a brand, especially in the export trade. Practically all export business of food products is handled on a basis of branded goods. To a much greater extent than the American producer realizes foreign buyers make use of brands in purchasing products by cable and inspectors in foreign lands depend upon brands in judging the quality of the products they handle.

There are three ways of buying goods for export. One way is by the use of samples of standard products, and by orders, either cable, giving instructions to agents to buy specified quantities of certain branded products; the third method, by far the least used, is for an importer to visit foreign countries in person and select products wanted.

Advantages of Brands.

In the United States there is a standard and of many copyrighted brands on domestic products has helped sell goods of various kinds and trade-marked goods of quality